

Sphinx Symphony backs minority musicians
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Like almost all professional black and Latino classical musicians, violist John Madison rarely saw anyone who looked like him when he was playing in youth orchestras in his native Grand Rapids or studying music at the University of Michigan. So when he first played in the all-black and Latino Sphinx Symphony, he was shocked to share the stage with 50 kindred souls.

"It was an emotional and profound experience for many of us," says Madison, principal violist of the Michigan Opera Theatre Orchestra.

"Most of us hadn't shared that experience before. You could look at someone and you didn't have to say anything. You knew they were probably the only black kid in their youth orchestra too. And here we were sharing the same thrill."

The 11th annual Sphinx Competition for young minority string players returns to southeastern Michigan this week, culminating with Sunday's finals concert at Orchestra Hall. Though the spotlight falls primarily on the 18 semifinalists in junior and senior divisions, the Sphinx Symphony remains a pillar of the event and a powerful symbol of founder Aaron Dworkin's vision to expand opportunities for minorities in classical music.

The symphony, which accompanies the competitors during the week, includes musicians from top orchestras like the Atlanta Symphony, Metropolitan Orchestra and England's Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, professional freelance musicians, teachers and former Sphinx laureates and semifinalists. The conductor, making his Sphinx debut, is Tito Muoz, a fast-rising 24-year-old assistant conductor with the Cleveland Orchestra.

"The role of the orchestra is critical, not only for performing during the festival but for the mentorship they provide the laureates," says Dworkin. "We have master classes, sessions about auditions and networking opportunities."

The Sphinx Competition has become a signature event in classical music, doling out more than \$100,000 in prizes and scholarships annually to music schools, and opportunities to perform with top American orchestras. Beyond the competition, the Sphinx Organization oversees a growing empire of education programs, from a preparatory institute at Wayne State University for students ages 11 to 18 and a program reaching into Detroit neighborhoods, to a summer camp near Boston and a program that gets classical music into school curriculums in New York, Atlanta, Miami and other cities.

There are residencies by laureates in schools nationwide, an instrument loan program, the Harlem Quartet (composed of former Sphinx laureates), and an annual Carnegie Hall gala. The organization's total budget is about \$3 million and its programs reach about 30,000 kids a year.

The newest initiative is a national tour by the Sphinx Chamber Orchestra in October. Underwritten by a three-year, \$500,000 grant from the Mellon Foundation, the three-week tour will include stops in Chicago, Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, Boston and elsewhere. The orchestra will be stocked with about 25 competition alumni.

"The chamber orchestra is tomorrow's Sphinx Symphony," says Dworkin.

The latest statistics from the League of American Orchestras in New York show that African Americans made up about 1.4% of American orchestral musicians in 2005-06 and Latinos accounted for 2.1%. Though small, the combined numbers are growing, up 21% since 1995.

Experts say the low numbers are the result of the historical lack of role models and peer support and cuts to school music programs that fall disproportionately on urban areas. Sphinx primes the pump, and it works.

Though the average age of Sphinx laureates is just 25, four laureates have won full-time professional orchestra jobs in Portland, Ore., Grand Rapids, San Antonio and Puerto Rico. Dozens have appeared with orchestras and won spots in top conservatories. The success of Sphinx has earned Dworkin, 37, wide acclaim, including a \$500,000 MacArthur Fellowship in 2005.

The notion of all-minority orchestras was not new -- Madison played in an all-black orchestra in the mid-'90s at a National Association of Negro Musicians convention -- but the professionalism and visibility of the Sphinx Symphony upped the ante. Dworkin wanted to connect minority students with the network of professional black and Latino musicians, from young pros to older pioneers.

The group makes an immediate impact on Sphinx competitors. "First of all, what struck me was the quality of the orchestra," says violinist Robyn Quinnett, 19, a 2006 semifinalist returning this year to play in the orchestra. "Then I began to get to know people and everyone was so nice and welcoming. It was like being accepted into a family."

Born on the Caribbean island of Montserrat, Quinnett grew up mainly in Fayetteville, N.C. Thanks to Sphinx, she won scholarships to the summer training program in Aspen, Colo., spent a year at Schwob School of Music in Columbus, Ga., and plays on a loaner violin of far greater quality than she could afford. She's living in Brooklyn, N.Y., and auditioning at all the major music schools in Manhattan.

"Sphinx absolutely changed my life," she said. "There was help around every corner. I had this drive to do something and they had all the resources."

Returning players consider themselves role models not just for the competitors but also for the kids who attend concerts with their families. Madison, 47, remembers that when he was growing up, white and black kids would ask him why he was playing the violin rather than basketball. He even quit playing in the 7th grade because he faced so much peer pressure. "Playing the violin was just something little black boys didn't do," he says.

For Juan Ramirez, a Mexican-born violinist in the Atlanta Symphony for more than 30 years, the most magical moments of playing in the Sphinx Symphony are in rehearsal as players from many different backgrounds merge into an ensemble that breathes as one.

"It's a similar feeling to a summer music festival," says Ramirez, 63, who this year will be concertmaster (leader of the first violins). "The rehearsals are very intense because of the heavy schedule, but it's fun."

Dworkin had to fight back tears the first time he stood on stage to welcome the symphony because of what the moment meant to him and the players in front of him. A former violinist, Dworkin also admits he was a little jealous that he wasn't performing too, since that had once been his dream.

"It's interesting," he says. "We have young musicians who come to the competition and they just assume that this network has always been there. They've always heard of Sphinx and this orchestra."

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The Sphinx Symphony in performance at Orchestra Hall in 2003: From left: Gwen Laster, Juan Ramirez, Jeffrey Boga (rear) and David Burnett.